

The Fire. 9th © Xen.

Decades ago, 1974, at age 20, a freak circumstance landed me for an unplanned one-day and night holdover in Tallahassee, Florida. Walking to my lodgings that night, absentmindedly I made a wrong turn down a dimly lit alley. Well into it before realizing my blunder, I looked around to leave noticing a dark and threatening shape following some distance behind me. Fearfully, I continued walking further on seeking an exit; my heart sank to terror upon approaching a solid brick wall closing off the alley with vague shadow figures moving in the darkness. Panicked, my thoughts spun to a whirl about how to escape this trap when suddenly everything stilled as my mind's voice said, "TURN, RIGHT, NOW!" Looking to my right there was an open doorway through which I hurriedly entered. Once over the threshold, a door slammed closed and I faced a shadowed woman standing behind it holding something. With her free arm and extended forefinger pointing out of the room in which we stood towards a hallway, vacantly looking through me she said, "Young man – safety!" before she vanished! Again, my mind's – voice lucidly commanded, "GO! ***NOW!***" Clarity vanished, I felt dazed, confused and ready to vomit darting down the passageway through a small lobby and out of the building-front street entrance, which emptied onto a busy thoroughfare where an elderly doorman and police officer stood chatting, while enjoying the warm evening. Once outside, overcome by smothering sickness, I stopped to lean upon a nearby wall gasping for air. The officer silently eyed me over as the doorman quietly asked, "Are you okay, son?" His words echoed from somewhere far away through my head. 'Yes,' said I, before leaving straightaway. Weeks passed before recovering enough to confide that experience to a trusted friend. He and I returned to that alley during full daylight for a closer examination and to get some answers. Absent doors or windows, we found *solid brick construction* of all outer building wall surfaces lining both sides and one end of a closed dead ended alleyway. One had to fly in or out of there absent any other admission but street access. Puzzled, we walked around to the front building entrance. The door attendant who was on duty the night of my last visit, greeted us, and he recalled to say, '...on that night it looked like you had just met a ghost...' if he only knew. I asked him about rear building access in or out of the hotel. He said, "There is none. 20 years ago, a terrible fire destroyed most of the building especially the back of it. Hotel restoration relocated all emergency exits allowing safer evacuation of occupants. Before then, a single emergency door exited into the alley; before 'the fire,' in which a family died in that death trap: a husband, his wife and their newborn son." Thanking him, we ventured into the hotel and found both lobby and hallway through which I found safe passage that night. However, it ended at the rear-building inner wall with no other rooms except those lining both sides of the hallway leading to it. Thinking aloud to my friend, "That night from the alleyway, I ran through an open, outer wall door into a room before entering the *end* of this hallway! Where are they?!" Street side again, I asked doorman about those layout discrepancies. Eyeing me cautiously, slowly he said, "Yeah, there was a room there 20 years ago. The people killed that night were guests in it. Fleeing for their safety during 'the fire,' they exited through the alley fire escape door located next to their room. For security reasons, there were no exterior handles on the door; it would only open from inside the building, and once closed automatically locked against outer reentry. With building evacuated, nobody could reopen the door. Moreover, part of the burning building collapsed blocking the open street end and their only escape out of the alley, which trapped and doomed the family. Under rubble, Firefighters

found grisly remains of three bodies huddled together and heat-fused onto the locked, outer door: a father shielding the mother holding their newborn, **infant son** in her arms. After ‘the fire,’ builders redesigned all emergency exits and routes to what you find now: no access exists in or out of this building into the back alley.” Voof! This was too macabre. Again, I felt very ill and dizzy. Both men looked at me strangely – my friend silently shaking his head and the door attendant once again softly speaking, “Are you okay, son?” Following that experience, many years passed before regaining my senses about it. Something happened that night; *what happened* remains enigmatic to this day. After that second visit, I never returned to Tallahassee, Florida. Since then, rarely do I question the mind - voice when it speaks. Occasionally, when ego absently convinces disobedience to it, fate gently nudges me via consequences, regret sometimes, into remembering an unforgettable instant of lifesaving obedience to it so long ago. Trapped in a moment when an escape door appeared within a solid brick wall, opened by an unknown woman shadowed behind it, holding something with one arm while pointing to shelter with her free one – as I heard these words: “Young man – safety!” Reader, take this account however you wish, for it does not change the fact that in those terrifying moments within a dark alley *something extraordinary happened*. You were not there – **I survived to write about it!**

“Though Destiny a hundred times waylays you, in the end it pitches a tent for you in Heaven. It is ‘god’s’ loving kindness to terrify you, in order to lead you to the Kingdom of safety.” — Rumi.

“God’ works through people because they listen to nothing else...”